

The Power of User Experience Design

Why Apple Rides the Digital Tsunami

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The digital age arrived around a decade ago at the turn of the century for companies competing on the basis of their consumer offering designs. For the first time, the goods elements of a company's offerings could be largely produced from digital technologies. This new capability radically changed the economics of and the approach to how companies create value for their customers – as well as their basis for competitive advantage.

But unlike most other companies, this rising digital tsunami fit Apple's business architecture such that they could ride the wave. What Steve Jobs did at Apple during its formative years twenty-five years earlier, with his tenacious commitment to design, served as a dress rehearsal for the time digital technology caught up with his methods. Digital technology dramatically lowered the hurdles to applying Job's design approach to value creation which resulted in one blazing success after another – the iMac, iPod, iPhone, iTunes, MacBooks, and iPad – throughout the past decade or so.

So what happened here? How did the consumer electronic product leaders of the time like Dell, Sony, Microsoft, HP, Motorola, Nokia, and RIM, all miss the opportunities Apple realized? John Sculley, in a [recent interview](#) provides some powerful insights.

One powerful reason, if not THE reason, for Apple's thriving in this time of technological change: Job's Apple practiced, from the gitgo in the 1970s, an unerring commitment to user experience design. Apple bent the technologies of the time, not compromising on the user experience, in order to fit them to its view of customer value. As Sculley said, the original Macintosh computer did not have an operating system! “[T]here wasn't one. It was all done with lots of tricks with hardware and software.” So instead of an elegant piece of hardware and operating system from an engineering standpoint, they had an elegant user experience with an unconventional, maybe even ugly, application of technology under the hood.

This holistic dedication to user experience was not true of most companies, including the electronics manufacturers in Japan, like Sony, Canon, and Matsushita who were so successful with their core competencies in a particular technology or its application in the 1980s and 1990s. (See Hamel and Prahalad's [Competing for the Future](#) for the companies thriving on their core technological competencies during this time.) The technological competency bases for these companies' competitive advantages at the time permeated their whole business enterprise. The architecture of their businesses reflected how they competed.

In the case of Sony, we still find them seeking to compete in a digital technology world hobbled by analog technology architecture of their company. As Sculley says in the interview

And you can see today the tremendous problem Sony has had for at least the last 15 years as the digital consumer electronics industry has emerged. They have been totally stove-piped in their organization. The software people don't talk to the hardware people, who don't talk to the component people, who don't talk to the design people. They argue between their organizations and they are big and bureaucratic.

I can attest to this firsthand. The maddening process of making use of the Sony Blu-ray player I purchased in January, 2011 perfectly reflected the architecture of Sony's company as described by Sculley.

With its focus on customer experience as the cornerstone of value creation since its origination, there is little doubt how Apple's business architecture served it in a time of technological change that threw most companies for a loop. In Apple's case, its experience-centric architecture enabled it to rapidly incorporate digital technologies, as they arose, to be able to integrate them into such an astounding offering like the iPod/iTunes combination of goods, services, and experiences that it revolutionized the music industry and consumer market. All of this while most companies were caught flat footed and are still struggling to deal with the new world order of digital technology.

Note: See Value Creation in the Digital Age – Job's Methodology for Developing Great Offerings for further insights on how Apple achieved its success to date.

Notes for Citations:

- Leadner Kahney, John Sculley On Steve Jobs, The Full Interview Transcript, <http://www.cultofmac.com/john-sculley-on-steve-jobs-the-full-interview-transcript/63295>, Oct 14, 2010, as retrieved on Jan 18, 2010
- Gary Hamel and C.K. Prahalad, Competing for the Future (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 1994)